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# ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE IN THE RUSSIAN AIRBORNE FORCES: THE LESSONS OF THE GEORGIAN CONFLICT

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U.S. ARMY WAR COLLEGE

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**ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE  
IN THE RUSSIAN AIRBORNE FORCES:  
THE LESSONS OF THE GEORGIAN CONFLICT**

**Rod Thornton**

**December 2011**

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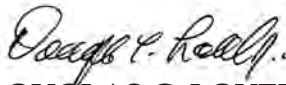
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## FOREWORD

The airborne divisions are undoubtedly the most impressive formations within the Russian army. The troops of the airborne forces (VDV) are the best trained and most professional in the army. Unlike their Western airborne counterparts, they are capable of fielding both armored personnel carriers and artillery assets. That affords them additional battlefield protection and firepower. VDV forces also have shown themselves—as in the 2008 war with Georgia—able to respond very quickly in crisis situations. Indeed, the airborne troops performed very creditably overall in Georgia. Such disciplined and professional airborne forces will likely form the vanguard of any interventionary operation beyond Russia's borders. Other than Georgia, the last time VDV forces were employed operationally abroad was in Kosovo in 1999. It was there at Priština International Airport that VDV troops had a potentially explosive showdown with British paratroopers. That may not be the last time lead elements of U.S. or North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces come face-to-face with the VDV. Given that such confrontations cannot be ruled out in the future, Russia's current airborne forces need to be understood.

This monograph examines the VDV and seeks to highlight what makes its formations such noteworthy potential allies or opponents. In particular, the monograph looks at the process of organizational change that the VDV has undergone since the war with Georgia.



DOUGLAS C. LOVELACE, JR.  
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ROD THORNTON lectures at the University of Nottingham in the United Kingdom (UK). He previously spent 9 years in a British Army infantry regiment, including 3 years in Northern Ireland and 1 year as a Serbo-Croat interpreter in Bosnia (1992-93). He has lived and worked in both Moscow and Sarajevo. Dr. Thornton taught for 5 years at the UK's Joint Services Command and Staff College (working for King's College London), which included guest lecturing at the NATO Defense College in Rome. He is the author of *Asymmetric Warfare: Threat and Response in the 21st Century* (2007) and is currently working on a book with Dr Bettina Renz on Russian military modernization. After leaving the army, he began an academic career that included a degree in Russian and led eventually to a Ph.D. focusing on comparative peacekeeping operations.





## SUMMARY

This monograph considers the recent history of organizational change in the Russian airborne forces (VDV). In particular, it looks at how the VDV has changed since the end of Russia's conflict with Georgia in 2008. The VDV, a force much admired in the Russian news media and society, has, in fact, escaped fairly unscathed during the comprehensive reform of the Russian army more generally over the last few years. In large part this has been because of the personality of the current head of the VDV, Lieutenant-General Vladimir Shamanov. Close to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, Shamanov – a “maverick” – has used his political connections to help ward off many of the cuts and reforms that the rest of the army has been subject to. He has managed to keep the basic structure of the VDV intact, while also dealing with a number of problematic issues related to manning, equipment, and training regimes within his organization. This monograph points out the level of professionalism in the VDV (shown during the Georgian war). But it also highlights the fact that, while some battalions within the VDV will be very effective and well-trained, other battalions will not. Thus it is difficult to judge precisely how battle-ready the VDV divisions now are. Ultimately, this monograph seeks to establish just what sort of Russian airborne forces U.S. or North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troops may one day have to either work alongside of or, indeed, face in some sort of confrontation.



# ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE IN THE RUSSIAN AIRBORNE FORCES: THE LESSONS OF THE GEORGIAN CONFLICT

## INTRODUCTION

In June 1999, hard on the heels of the ceasefire ending the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) war with Yugoslavia over Kosovo, British and Russian paratroopers raced each other to reach and seize for themselves the airport at the Kosovan capital, Priština. Arriving at the same time, the two groups indulged in an uneasy stand-off. Lieutenant-General Mike Jackson, the overall commander of the British forces and an ex-paratrooper himself, was ordered by his superior, General Wesley Clark, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) Supreme Allied Commander Europe, to block the runway in order to prevent the arrival of more airborne troops from Russia. General Jackson demurred, famously stating: "Sir, I'm not starting World War III for you. . . ." <sup>1</sup>

Such a confrontation may be unusual, but it could happen again. This was the kind of meeting — airborne against airborne — that is very likely to repeat itself if the vanguard of a U.S. or other NATO force comes up against the lead elements of another state in a conflict situation or as part of a multinational interventionary operation. This was the situation at Priština.

The Russian troops present at Priština were from the *Vozdushno-Desantnye Voyska*<sup>2</sup> (VDV). It is these VDV forces who will, likely as not, form the spearhead of any Russian military intervention abroad — be it in actual conflict or in some type of peace support or peacekeeping operation. These will be Russia's best combat troops. It is important, then, from a U.S. and

NATO perspective, that these frontline Russian forces be understood and appreciated: their strengths, weaknesses, structures, equipment, degree of professionalism, and overall fighting potential. It is important too, across a wider perspective in academia and among military organizations more generally, that a valid assessment be made of the current capabilities of and problems faced by Russia's most elite combat arm of service. This is particularly important in the wake of the quite-substantial changes that have occurred in the VDV recently. Specifically, this monograph will examine the changes that have been introduced since the war with Georgia in 2008. This conflict acted as a catalyst for change across the entire Russian military. In analyzing these changes in the VDV, this monograph concentrates on two specific questions: How did the changes come about, and what do they ultimately mean for the operational efficiency of Russia's airborne forces?

This monograph will begin by examining the degree of organizational change the VDV has undergone since the end of the Cold War. A fundamental issue here is the institutional backing the VDV could derive from political patronage. Of particular note in this regard is the relationship that developed between the VDV commander, Vladimir Shamanov, and President Vladimir Putin. Then we shall consider the VDV's participation in the war with Georgia. The VDV came out of this conflict with its structure basically intact – unlike the Russian ground forces. But some changes did result, and this monograph goes on to look at these changes in terms of equipment, manning, readiness, and air transport. The overall conclusion from this examination of Russia's VDV is that despite the many obstacles it has faced, it has emerged in the post-Geor-

gian-war era as a competent and well-drilled force. It is on a par with analogues in the West.

## **THE ESTEEMED VDV**

The VDV—be it in the Soviet era or now in the new Russia—has always been a source of pride in the country. The exploits of its forces have been trumpeted by the domestic news media, and thus, the public likewise holds the forces in high esteem, particularly since the Soviet war in Afghanistan (1979-89). The “blue berets” are portrayed as tough, aggressive, well-trained, and efficient. They have the best equipment, their officers are substantially better paid than those in the regular army, and they are provided with the highest-quality conscripts. The elite VDV is presented as something of a model—certainly when set against the example of the Russian military more generally, which tends to be characterized domestically as beset by waste, corruption, torpor, and general inefficiency. Consequently, Russia looks up to its VDV, and there are many reasons it should.<sup>3</sup>

The changes this organization has undergone over the last 2 years have increased its capabilities. If ever there is a repeat of the Priština incident, then any commander of NATO forces might think to adopt the same cautious approach as General Jackson. The VDV can represent a substantial foe.

## **THE VULNERABILITY TO CHANGE OF THE POST-COLD WAR AIRBORNE FORCES**

In the immediate post-Cold War era, there seemed to be no strategic logic for maintaining Russia’s airborne forces. In traditional Soviet thinking, VDV

troops were only to be used for deep interdiction operations. The end of the Cold War, however, removed the rationale for such operations and thus the *raison d'être* for the VDV itself.<sup>4</sup> Hence, to a large extent ever since 1991, the VDV has been struggling to weave for itself a specific role within the fabric of the Russian military. For without such a role, the VDV was becoming vulnerable, if not to outright disbandment, then at least of major reorganization, redesignation, or absorption into other arms of service. Given that it was a well-trained, mobile force with a strong *esprit de corps* and fighting potential, there were many within the Russian military who were casting acquisitive eyes at the prize airborne troops.

One element of the VDV's vulnerability lay with the fact that it was a separate arm of service. Its formations are not subject to the control of the military districts in which they are based.<sup>5</sup> Rather, the VDV is the strategic reserve of the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, i.e., the president himself (currently Dimitri Medvedev).<sup>6</sup>

The rationale for absorption into the ground forces, in particular, was based upon the fact that in the immediate post-Cold War era, the VDV seemed to lack not only a strategic role, but also an operational one. There was the basic weakness, for instance, of relying upon forces delivered by troop-transport aircraft into any modern combat zone—where air defense would presumably be very effective. What, then, was the utility of airborne forces?<sup>7</sup> The VDV troops were also considered to be too lightly armed and therefore lacking battlefield survivability. This was held to be true, despite the fact that, in contrast to Western airborne forces, VDV units possessed armored personnel carriers (APCs) and other armored vehicles. But

the airborne models lacked the measure of armored protection boasted by the armored vehicles employed by the Russian ground forces. A further reason for the ground forces to take over the VDV began to emerge as the 1990s progressed. VDV troops were spending more and more of their time fighting separatists in Chechnya. Their presence there as elite infantry was much appreciated, and they proved to be very effective in this counter guerrilla role. But long tours of duty in Chechnya meant that little training time was being devoted to their principal mission as airborne or air-assault forces. Their particular skills in this regard therefore atrophied, and they came to be regarded more and more simply as infantry soldiers, albeit elite ones. So, the logic ran, why were they not part of the ground forces? This particular susceptibility of the VDV image was, moreover, exacerbated by the withdrawal of Russian operational forces from Chechnya in 2005. That year, all nonspecialized VDV units finally left the republic. The last to leave, in 2006, were the *spetsnaz* troops of the VDV's 45th Separate Reconnaissance Regiment. The exodus of the airborne forces' role in Chechnya opened the door to re-thinking their status, to more considered reflection as to their future role and purpose.<sup>8</sup>

This post-Cold War debate over the future of the VDV was conducted against a background of massive cutbacks in the Russian military overall. In the early 1990s, with the national economy desperately strapped for cash, the armed forces were subject to substantial retrenchment. The major military cost-saving measures introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980s were continued by President Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s. During this latter period, however, the VDV was sheltered to a large degree by the fact that General



Pavel Grachev, formerly of the Soviet airborne forces, had been appointed Defense Minister—serving from 1992 to 1996. While he oversaw an overall reduction in military personnel of some 1,122,000,<sup>9</sup> Grachev did not wield his ax against the VDV; in fact, he increased its strength somewhat by adding a heavy tank regiment to the 104th Airborne Division (now disbanded). He wanted the VDV to continue to be independent, remaining the principal strike force of the Russian military—and he felt that such a status could be preserved only by adding such extra firepower.<sup>10</sup>

A succession of Russian presidents has also been loath to tinker too much with the VDV. As the supreme commander's reserve, the VDV is, at least nominally, operating under the orders of the president himself. No Russian president would be enthusiastic at the prospect of having the airborne forces absorbed into a body that he could not so easily direct—such as the ground forces.

Grachev, though, came to be replaced as Defense Minister by a man who took a view opposite to that of the airborne general. General Igor Rodionov (with an armored forces background) put the defense emphasis on classical heavy forces. Basically, Rodionov tried to crush the airborne forces, reducing their overall numbers and dissolving the 104th's "flying tank" regiment.<sup>11</sup>

Rodionov was removed in 1997. Yeltsin and his economic technocrats were looking for cheaper defense options than those provided by Rodionov's preference for Soviet-style mass. The political hierarchy wanted smaller, more flexible forces. Rodionov was replaced by General Igor Sergeyev who, as the former head of the Strategic Rocket Forces, favored the cheaper defense option of relying mostly on the

country's nuclear arsenal. He had no time for mass. Sergeyev brought the military still further down in size so that it stood at only 1.2 million by January 1999. But Sergeyev was trying to push through too many changes that targeted the largest power bloc within the Russian military machine—the ground forces. Size patently mattered to the generals of the ground forces. Any overall manpower cuts meant, of course, that fewer generals would be needed; such generals thus had a vested interest in opposing the proposed changes. The pressure told, with Sergeyev being ousted in March 2001 and replaced as Defense Minister by Sergei Ivanov, the choice of the new president, Vladimir Putin.

Putin, like Gorbachev and Yeltsin before him, wanted a smaller, more cost-effective military. Ivanov was nominally the first-ever nonmilitary Russian/Soviet Defense Minister (formerly in the *Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopastnosti*<sup>12</sup> [KGB], so he was technically not a civilian either). Putin, likewise ex-KGB, liked to appoint (and to surround himself with) ministers with the same bureaucratic/cultural background as himself—hence, the general preponderance of ex-KGB/Federal Security Bureau (FSB)<sup>13</sup> personnel in the Russian political hierarchy. But this meant that Ivanov lacked a power base within the military itself, and found it expedient to take the line of least resistance in his particular reform proposals. He perforce pushed a ground forces agenda. The size of the military was thus stabilized for a time, and further cuts were halted.<sup>14</sup>

Given that Ivanov could not really push through the reforms that Putin wanted to see, he was replaced by Anatoliy Serdyukov in 2007. Serdyukov, the former head of the Tax Ministry (and a true civilian), was

seen as a man who would have the dexterity to target the military's Achilles heel—its internal corruption and still-excessive size. Putin felt able to promote this total outsider, Serdyukov, into such a role because the President was by now more confident in his own position and less reliant on old comrades from the security services. The role of Putin and Serdyukov in reshaping the military and, in particular, the VDV, will be discussed later.

## **CHANGES IN THE VDV PRIOR TO THE WAR WITH GEORGIA**

It was against this post-Cold War background that the need for overall cuts in the Russian military caused a new VDV to take shape. The organization was subject to change, but the changes being made were being driven largely by the rationale that smaller was better. While the Russian military as a whole suffered greatly in this immediate post-Soviet shake-up and retrenchment process, the VDV itself suffered considerably less. The reductions that did take place did not really represent any major rethinking as to the airborne forces' contribution to the defense of Russia. There are, however, with regard to the actual changes that did take place within the VDV before the conflict with Georgia, two factors worthy of particular note—structure and manning.

### **Structure.**

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, the VDV was reduced in size from seven divisions to five (leaving 35,000 personnel). Two divisions were lost because they found themselves marooned on the territories of

the newly independent states. Of the five divisions left on Russian territory, only the 104th was disbanded (and even it was eventually resurrected to become the 31st Separate Airborne Brigade, still based in the same city, Ulyanovsk). This left at the time four airborne divisions: the 7th (Novorossiysk); the 76th (Pskov); the 98th (Ivanovo), and the 106th (Tula). (For more details on these formations, see the Appendix.) These formations did not, however, escape the cuts completely. Each division lost an airborne regiment, leaving two instead of three. Hence, the current troop strength of these four divisions stands at only some 5,000 each.

Another VDV unit to be formed in the wake of the Soviet collapse was the 45th Separate Reconnaissance Regiment (Kubinka, Moscow). This is a special operations (i.e., *spetsnaz*) unit within the VDV. Roughly 700 strong, it is subordinated to the VDV Military Council, but on operations actually becomes subordinate to the *Glavnoe Razvedyvatel'noye Upravleniye*<sup>15</sup> (GRU). The GRU, directed by the General Staff, is the military's foreign intelligence service.

In terms of the VDV's training centers, these have remained at Ryazan (the city known as the home of the airborne forces) and at Omsk.

In 2006, a further structural reorganization of the VDV resulted in a redesignation of formations. The 98th and 106th divisions remained in the airborne role, i.e., they retained the capability to air-drop personnel into operational zones. The 7th and 76th divisions and the 31st Separate Brigade, however, were redesignated as air assault, i.e., they would merely be airlifted into operational zones (by aircraft or helicopter). One battalion, however, in both the 7th and the 76th has remained parachute-trained. The 7th Division also received the additional designation of "Mountain," as

in Air Assault (Mountain) Division.<sup>16</sup> But this division has little to indicate that it has changed in any specific way to conduct operations in mountainous areas. The 7th and 76th were also reinforced by additional self-propelled artillery units, significantly increasing their organic firepower assets.<sup>17</sup>

The 31st Separate Airborne Brigade lost its organic APCs and artillery assets. The troops in this brigade (in contrast to the VDV divisions, which still have APCs and artillery—see Appendix) are now akin to Western airborne forces in that they are expected to operate largely on foot.

## **Manning.**

In the mid-1990s, the professionalization of the Russian military began. This was in line with the general sentiment felt across a host of post-Cold War armies—including those in Western Europe—that mass was no longer a prerequisite for the conduct of modern warfare. Technology, not mass, was becoming regarded everywhere as the principal force multiplier. Militaries today are seen to require less manpower, but the manpower that they do have needs to be more highly trained than previously. The new technologies coming into service have to be operated by skilled personnel. These skills can be honed only over several years of professional service. This means, of course, that short-service conscripts are no longer needed. They have neither the motivation nor the skill-sets to man the modern military organization.

These same sentiments were also evident in Russia. Many in the military realized which way the wind was blowing and that the country's conscript-based military was becoming an anachronism. From

the early 1990s onwards, reform was being discussed by senior officers on the General Staff. These “were led primarily by the goal of making the structure of the armed forces resemble the structure of the armed forces of the most militarily developed states as much as possible.”<sup>18</sup> Political leaders concurred. They were also anxious to reduce the burden of conscription on Russian society, and to reap the electoral benefits of removing such a generally unpopular institution. Thus, the professionalization of the military was seen as the way forward – having volunteer recruits sign on for a specific contract period (3 years), and to be reasonably well paid to do so.

There were those, of course, who held opposing views. Moving from a mass-conscript military to a smaller professional one naturally meant fewer jobs for officers – including generals. There were also those within the military who said that China should be looked upon as the prime candidate for Russia’s future opponent. If it was, then mass would be needed to counter the mass that the Chinese would undoubtedly deploy.

This process of professionalizing the Russian military began tentatively back in the mid-1990s. But it took on a firmer shape only when, in 2002, the 104th Regiment of the 76th Airborne Division (as it was then known) was chosen to be the first Russian military formation to be fully manned by contractees or, in Russian, *kontraktniki*.<sup>19</sup> This process was intended to spread to the rest of the 76th, and then to the other VDV divisions. The plan was that by the end of 2007, all of the VDV divisions – except for the 106th – were to be 90 percent manned by *kontraktniki*.<sup>20</sup>

This was the situation with regard to the VDV and to the process of change more generally within the

Russian military prior to the 2008 war with Georgia. The situation can be characterized as one in which the VDV was in the forefront of the Russian army's professionalization process. It was also being protected from radical change by the facts that it had such a high public profile and that it was favored by influential individuals—including presidents of Russia. It is this aspect of the VDV's supporters and their role in the process of change that the next section will consider.

## **CHANGE: THE ROLE OF THE VDV COMMANDER**

The role of individual senior officers in the process of change in military organizations is prominent in the literature on the subject. In such literature, a single very senior officer, desiring some form of significant change in his military organization, is not capable on his own of generating the requisite momentum for that change. The vested interests are just too powerful. The guardians of the status quo within any organization, comfortable as they are with established structures, systems, and procedures, will always stand in opposition to significant change. Such change will undermine their individual stakes within the organization, and throw into question the skill-sets that saw them promoted to high rank in the first place.<sup>21</sup>

Those individual senior officers who do oppose the status quo are often referred to in the literature as “mavericks,” originally a term of opprobrium but today in most organizational studies a term of respect. Authors such as Barry Posen examine the role of such mavericks in generating change in military organizations. The only way, it is noted, that such men can effect the changes they want is by allying themselves

with those in the political world of a like mind, civilian leaders who also want to see the changes but who cannot get them adopted against opposition from within the military they are nominally supposed to direct. These civilian masters can form, say Posen and others, a symbiotic relationship with the maverick officer. Together they can force through the changes they both want. Historical examples abound. General Heinz Guderian in the German army of the 1930s was supported in his views on *Blitzkrieg* by Chancellor Adolf Hitler. For another, Air-Chief Marshal Hugh Dowding, the head of British Fighter Command in the 1930s, was able to persuade the Royal Air Force to invest less in bombers and more in fighters (a decision that ultimately saved Britain in 1940), only by gaining the support of an important minister, Sir Thomas Inskip. Other examples are Billy Mitchell and Hyman Rickover in the United States, and Brigadier Charles de Gaulle in 1930s France. Posen observes that neither party – maverick nor civilian – can push through major change without, as he puts it, “a kind of partnership.”<sup>22</sup>

The fact that the VDV is the traditional strategic reserve of the Russian president has always meant that the VDV already had a kind of built-in partnership with at least one powerful civilian master. Thus, whichever officer was commanding the VDV in post-Soviet Russia tended to have enough political support to ward off threats of the VDV’s absorption into the ground forces. He could also put forward his own ideas as to what should happen to the organization and at least gain a respectful hearing. Moreover, the sheer force of personality of a succession of commanders of the VDV during the 1990s and 2000s – assisted by the general public popularity of the airborne



troops — has also helped. Overall, this has led to a situation in which the head of the VDV had come to assume an importance — when it comes to the process of change in the Russian army — all out of proportion to his rank (lieutenant-general, in this case — which is only a two-star rank in Russia). The position of this particular arm of service commander is thus well-nigh unique in terms of the study of change in military organizations more generally.

The various recent heads of the VDV have all been figures of some note — in the political realm as well as the military. The VDV was led for many of the post-Soviet years (1996-2003) by the high-profile Lieutenant-General Georgiy Shpak. He was later to become a regional governor. During his tenure, Shpak managed to fend off perhaps the most serious post-Cold War attempt to absorb the VDV into the ground forces, made by the then Chief of the General Staff (CGS) General Anatoliy Kvashnin. Shpak actually went to President Putin to argue his case, and this obviously had the required effect.<sup>23</sup>

Shpak was then followed by Aleksandr Kolmakov (2003-2007), who, on retirement, became a Deputy Defense Minister. Then came Valerii Yevtukhovich (2007-2009). He was to clash with the current (2011) CGS, General Nikolai Makarov, over the use of mobile rapid-reaction forces specifically — Yevtukhovich's own airborne forces. Makarov, coming from the ground forces and ever conscious of the potential political clout of the head of the VDV, was naturally of a mind to clip the institutional wings of this arm of service and make it more amenable to his and the General Staff's control.<sup>24</sup> Yevtukhovich, lacking the political support he might have expected, lost out in this particular battle and was retired early against his

wishes.<sup>25</sup> Being commander of the VDV made one influential, it seems, but not omnipotent.

### **Vladimir Shamanov.**

The current head of the VDV is Lieutenant-General Vladimir Shamanov. He is a man with more than a degree of clout and influence, a man worthy of study. He has played a particularly influential role in the process of organizational change in the VDV, and will probably continue in that vein.

Shamanov took command of the airborne forces in May 2009. Twice designated a Hero of the Russian Federation, he has been described as “a Personality with a capital ‘P’”<sup>26</sup> and as “definitely the most colorful military leader in the armed forces.”<sup>27</sup> Indeed, his career has been clouded by a series of misdemeanors that have landed him in various degrees of hot water. However, there is a general feeling within Russia that having a VDV commander with some color is no bad thing; indeed, it is to be welcomed. Tough military formations like the VDV should have a tough commander, even if his past is somewhat checkered.

Shamanov has had an interesting military career. He joined the military in 1978, and after VDV officer training school, he first commanded an artillery platoon in the 76th Division, and then a company at the Ryazan Airborne School.<sup>28</sup> When he was with the 76th Division, Shamanov was noted as being a good company commander by the man then in charge of this division (and later to command the VDV itself), General Shpak. Shpak wanted Shamanov to be promoted straight to battalion commanding officer (CO), skipping the usual Russian promotion ticket-punch, an interim command appointment of deputy battalion CO.

But no other division in the VDV would accept him at that level and so, in an unusual departure from rigid protocol, Shamanov was given command of a battalion in his own 76th Division.

Another unusual aspect of Shamanov's postings is that he never served in Afghanistan during the Soviet operation there (1979-1989). Given the intensive use of airborne units in this conflict, his absence was very rare among the community of airborne officers. The fact that he was not an *Afghantsy* left him at the margins of that clique of VDV (and also of ground forces) officers who served there. Many of his future senior officers would come to look down on Shamanov because he was not, in essence, "one of them."

Shamanov left the 76th for the Staff College at Frunze, where he graduated in 1989. By 1990 he was deputy commander of the 300th Regiment in the 98th Airborne Division in Kishinev (now Chisinau in Moldova). The commander of this regiment was Colonel Kolmakov (later also to take command of the VDV). Shamanov was noted as not being a success in the 98th, principally because he was not an *Afghantsy*. Still, he was promoted again in 1991 and departed to take over the 328th Regiment in the now-disbanded 104th Division. While in this post, he applied to attend the prestigious General Staff Academy, again at Frunze. His superior officer, however, refused to approve the transfer, and Shamanov punched him in the face!<sup>29</sup>

During the First Chechen War in 1994, he was Chief of Staff of the 7th Airborne Division. In March 1995, still in Chechnya, Shamanov was appointed to head an operational task force within the division. While in this post, charges were brought against him in relation to an operation undertaken by his forces in neighboring Ingushetia in October 1995. Here his troops,

mistakenly thinking that the airport at Sleptovsk had been seized by rebels, had landed by helicopter and launched an immediate attack in force. The random shooting they engaged in resulted in the death of a taxi driver. Charges against Shamanov were dropped following a Duma amnesty.

Shamanov's next promotion was to take him out of the VDV when he became, also in October 1995, the deputy commander of the Chechnyan forces while double-hatting as the deputy commander of the North Caucasus Military District's 58th Army.

His luck continued when he was (finally) sent to the General Staff Academy in July 1996. His absence from Chechnya during the ensuing period meant that he was not tainted – as much as other military officers were – by the embarrassing withdrawal of Russian troops from most of Chechnya after the Khasavyurt Accords of August 1996. This agreement with the Chechens had been negotiated by Yeltsin against the wishes of many in the military.

Shamanov graduated from Frunze in 1998 and was then appointed chief of staff and deputy commander of the 20th Army based in the Moscow Military District. Almost immediately, however, he was dispatched to the Caucasus, again to double-hat as commander of both the 58th Army and the West Group of Forces of the Joint Contingent of Federal Troops in the North Caucasus. He later assumed command of the whole Joint Contingent.<sup>30</sup>

Shamanov's greatest triumph was as the principal architect of the success of the Second Chechen War of 1999-2000, a war in which the Chechen opposition was crushed much more quickly and brutally than in the first conflict. This resumption of the war in Chechnya in 1999 had suited many in the military who wanted

revenge against the Chechens and for the humiliation of their withdrawal in 1996. It also suited the man who rode to the presidency of Russia on the back of this same military victory—Vladimir Putin. He, as prime minister in 1999, had been the principal political mover (President Yeltsin was by then ailing) toward a reengagement in Chechnya. The fact that this new war was over so quickly gave Putin immense political leverage, easily enough to ensure his success in the presidential elections of 2000. The new president was thus extremely grateful, among other victorious military figures, to Shamanov.<sup>31</sup> The general was also lauded in other quarters, and continues to bask in the acclaim.

Shamanov's reputation in a military sense lies in the fact that he was seen in Chechnya as someone who got the job done. The problem with this approach is that he tended to let firepower dominate in engagements to the detriment of any discrimination between combatants and noncombatants. Shamanov, however, seems not to be overly concerned about the civilian casualties his methods caused. To him, a war was a war—his operational techniques would be the same whether the war was conventional or counter guerrilla.

Shamanov's combat philosophy in Chechnya was certainly not approved of in certain military quarters. His superior, Colonel-General Gennadiy Troshev, who commanded the Defense Ministry Group of Forces in Chechnya, rebuked Shamanov for being barbaric and for using excessively forceful methods. Troshev had earlier commanded the East Group of Forces in the First Chechen War and had himself consciously avoided the indiscriminate assaults that Shamanov preferred. But whereas Troshev's approach had led to costly delays in that first war, Shamanov, with his methods, had met with no such delays in the second.<sup>32</sup>

Other senior officers took issue with Shamanov. General Aslanbek Aslakhanov,<sup>33</sup> acting as an adviser to President Putin, called him a “butcher.” And when Colonel-General Viktor Kazantsev, who was then Shamanov’s superior as North Caucasus Military District Commander, had tried to rein him in, he received the reply: “It is not for you to teach me!”<sup>34</sup>

Shamanov, moreover, was allegedly implicated in a massacre by Russian forces that took place at Alkhan-Yurt in Chechnya in 1999 (although Shamanov actually received one of his Hero of the Russian Federation decorations at this action). In an interview with the journalist Anna Politovskaya (later to be murdered), Shamanov said that he “regarded the wives and children of militants as the same bandits [as their husbands and fathers] and was surprised that someone might think differently.” Shamanov was also later to speak out in support of Colonel Yuriy Budanov, an officer who had been found guilty, in a notorious case in Russia, of strangling a Chechen girl.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, the European Court of Human Rights has said that he is responsible for very serious human right violations.<sup>36</sup> The Nobel Laureate for Peace, physicist Andrei Sakharov, also added his accusations, including that Shamanov has a serious xenophobic streak.<sup>37</sup>

Shamanov is thus no angel and no respecter of authority. He appears not to be concerned about inflicting casualties, whether they are those of the enemy, noncombatants, or even his own men. He also seems to prefer the use of overwhelming firepower, rather than more-nuanced ways of achieving military success. He is a man who carries with him some serious war crimes baggage.<sup>38</sup>

This, then, is Vladimir Shamanov’s “colorful” past. Despite the general opprobrium he has generated

with regard to his activities in Chechnya, he has always been protected by Putin, who owed Shamanov. Shamanov had achieved the results that essentially brought Putin to the presidency. But even Putin's power has its limits, and he has not always been able to protect his general. In August 2000, for instance, the military hierarchy managed to have its way, forcing Shamanov into early retirement. Officially, Shamanov had left both Chechnya and the military for "health reasons."<sup>39</sup>

Putin was still able to step in and help Shamanov. The president, to all intents and purposes, in November 2000 handed him the post of governor of Ulyanovsk *oblast* (or region). This was not a role that Shamanov overly welcomed. As he later put it, "I found myself [in] the post of Ulyanovsk *oblast* governor somewhat against my will."<sup>40</sup>

It was no surprise that Shamanov was not a success as a governor. He was accused of trying to govern the *oblast* as if he were running a regiment. In 2004, he recorded an approval rating of just 3 percent.<sup>41</sup> He then moved on in November 2004 to become an assistant to the then prime minister, Mikhail Fradkov, advising on social welfare issues with regard to service personnel. In 2006, and working in the same field, he became an adviser to Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov. Shamanov, having thus operated on the staffs of both the Prime Minister and the Defense Minister, was able to gain invaluable political experience.

It was during his stint in the Ministry of Defense that Shamanov met President George Bush in March 2007 in the Oval Office. This meeting caused consternation among civil rights activists at the time. Afterward, and revealing perhaps his xenophobic streak, Shamanov compared the United States to Nazi Germany.<sup>42</sup>

Vladimir Shamanov, despite his tainted past, was to be called back into the military by presidential edict in November 2007. He was given the important position of Director of Combat Training.<sup>43</sup> It seemed apparent that Serdyukov had been brought back by Putin to help the newly appointed Defense Minister, Anatoliy Serdyukov. As a civilian, and former head of the Tax Ministry at that, he was having trouble, not unexpectedly, trying to push through his reform plans against the considerable opposition by the aforementioned corpus of conservative generals, particularly those on the General Staff. Shamanov was brought in, it seems, to provide some of the muscle that would help see Serdyukov's desired changes through.<sup>44</sup>

Shamanov's reinstatement seems to be the first-ever case in post-Soviet Russia of a senior officer, once retired, returning to uniform.<sup>45</sup> It is an indication of just how much Putin values him. The logic of bringing him back, from Putin's point of view, is obvious. Shamanov is one of the trusted Chechen generals who helped Putin to power in the first place. To bring him back into such a powerful position made sense, not only in terms of helping Serdyukov, but also in that Shamanov would doubtless remain loyal to Putin. Shamanov, of course, is not popular within the mainstream military itself. This is due to several factors: his non-*Afghantsy* status; his many misdemeanors; his brutal record in Chechnya, and the fact that he comes from a VDV (and not a mainstream ground forces) background. Herein lies his worth to Putin. There exists in this case a classic divide-and-rule relationship in terms of civil-military relations: the politician chooses a military figure (Shamanov) for a high command post whose power base comes mainly from the man who appointed him (Putin), and not so much from within



the military organization itself. Such officers as Shamanov, because they owe their position to political masters and not to their standing in the military, are then pliable: they can be manipulated by the politicians. In turn, Shamanov has power—but power that drives only from his political backing. When this political power is added to his media-generated public popularity, he gains the individual capacity to usher through the types of changes within the military that both he and, more importantly, his political masters want. Quite major changes can then be achieved by this partnership.

This same logic applied when Shamanov was appointed head of the VDV in May 2009 (another political decision) and remains there as of this writing. As a non-*Afghantsy* head of the VDV, he is still something of an outsider even within his own organization—so he is still looking to civilian masters for support, rather than within the organization.

Shamanov remains a popular military figure with the public. Of course, despite all his indiscretions, his reputation probably does him little harm as the head of the airborne forces. A little “personality,” as has been stated, is expected of someone leading what are considered to be the Russian Federation’s shock troops: the all-action, no-nonsense, and decisive VDV. Elements of the Russian news media—media that carry considerable coverage of military issues—have played up this image. They tend to stress the efficiency and toughness of the VDV vis-à-vis the rest of the military—that of inefficiency, torpor, and general ineptitude. The influential military newspaper, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, is particularly fawning in its constant praise of Shamanov. Thus, the paratroopers’ leader is portrayed as the man of action whose merely venial sins are seen in an understanding light.

But even in his post as VDV commander, controversy still continues to dog Shamanov. In October 2009, he ordered a squad of his VDV troops (*spetsnaz* personnel from the 45th Separate Reconnaissance Regiment) to be sent to a company owned by his son-in-law — who stood accused of murder — in order to impede a police investigation into the crime. Shamanov's phone conversation ordering in the squad was recorded by a newspaper. However, despite receiving an official reprimand, Shamanov was to keep his job.<sup>46</sup> He had powerful friends. The partnership remained intact.

## CHANGE AND THE WAR WITH GEORGIA

Traditionally, major change in military organizations comes on the heels of wartime experience. Combat provides the stress test that highlights problems that normally remain hidden in peacetime. Mere exercises cannot normally bring such problems to light, because military exercises tend to have an inbuilt capacity to prove the worth of existing structures and standard operating procedures. The most recent stress test for the Russian military obviously came in the conflict with Georgia in August 2008. It is not our intention here to discuss this war in any great detail, but the lessons learned both by the Russian armed forces in general and by the VDV in particular are worthy of brief note.

The weaknesses of the military as a whole became obvious. Methodologies, as well as tactics, techniques, procedures, and equipment, were all revealed in a negative light, as is often the way with a military — such as Russia's — that had not fought a war against a symmetrical opponent for some considerable time.

The issues raised mostly related to the initial readiness to move, command and control procedures, and interservice and interarm cooperation. On the whole, the VDV troops themselves were seen to have performed well in the conflict. However, this did not prevent the VDV, along with the rest of the military, from coming under pressure to conduct significant reforms in light of the Georgian experience.

The conflict with Georgia began in South Ossetia. South Ossetia is technically a part of Georgia. This country had gained its independence in 1991 after the break-up of the Soviet Union, and the new government in Tbilisi, the Georgian capital, was then faced with separatist pressures of its own. The regions of Abkhazia on the Black Sea coast, and South Ossetia on Georgia's northern border with Russia, both pushed for autonomy. Violence ensued. Both Abkhaz and Ossetes looked to Russia at that time for help in breaking away from Tbilisi's grip, and Moscow, for various reasons of its own, agreed to provide assistance in the form of peacekeeping troops. This move tended to thwart Georgia's unification efforts. By 1993, with the help of these Russian peacekeepers—who had basically muted both conflicts—Abkhazia and South Ossetia had achieved their *de facto* autonomy. However, both regions still remained part of Georgia in the eyes of the international community.

Conflict broke out again on the night of August 7-8, 2008, when Georgian forces bombarded Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia. This was followed by a movement into the enclave by Georgian ground troops and their seizing of Tskhinvali. Russia was not prepared to allow the action to succeed, if for no other reason than some of the Russian peacekeeping troops had been killed in the initial bombardment and fighting. Moscow claimed that it had to react.

Troops from the 58th Army ground forces stationed just over the border with Georgia were called into action, as was the VDV. The Russian plan was to launch a two-pronged assault against Georgian forces—one through South Ossetia and another through Abkhazia (which had not been attacked by Georgia). In South Ossetia, a number of VDV elements were involved: the 104th and 234th regiments of the 76th Division, and the 217th Regiment of the 98th Division (although none were parachuted into the area). The then head of the VDV, Lieutenant-General Valeriy Yevtukhovich, commanded the forces in South Ossetia.

Two battalions of the 76th had taken less than 24 hours from initial call-out at their base in Pskov to deploy 2,000 kilometers (km) and to arrive in Beslan in North Ossetia (part of Russia proper). These battalions had then moved into South Ossetia even before elements of the 58th Army's 42nd and 19th Motor Rifle Divisions—based nearby in Chechnya and North Ossetia respectively—had done so. Thus, it was these VDV battalions (although lacking armor) that were in the vanguard of the Russian move against Georgian forces. Moreover, *spetsnaz* troops of the 45th Separate Reconnaissance Regiment had moved into position so quickly that they were actually involved in the original defense of Tskhinvali against Georgian troops.<sup>47</sup>

One of the problems created by the very mobility and speed of the VDV units was the fact that they tended to lack adequate force protection. Russian aircraft could not completely eliminate the air threat coming from the Georgians, and the VDV units did not have enough organic anti-aircraft assets. The VDV had also moved too far ahead of the protection that would have been provided by any ground forces' anti-aircraft shield. Russian aircraft could not be called

in by the VDV to strike ground targets, since there was no means of ground-to-air communication. Moreover, while VDV troops found themselves in the van of the Russian assault, they were advancing without proper reconnaissance capabilities.<sup>48</sup>

In the Abkhaz sector, some eight VDV battalions were deployed there within 5 days of the commencement of hostilities. No entire brigade or division was present, so that there were simply battalion groupings operating more or less independently of each other.<sup>49</sup> Only four battalions from the 7th Air Assault Division actually engaged in combat. A battalion tactical group from the 31st Separate Airborne Assault Brigade was also present, but took no part in the fighting. In Abkhazia, as distinct from the South Ossetian front, there were hardly any ground forces troops nearby who could assist the VDV. The role of the VDV in this sector was thus completely crucial.<sup>50</sup> It was here, in Abkhazia, that Vladimir Shamanov comes to assume a prominent role.

The first VDV unit to become involved in combat in Abkhazia was a battalion from the 108th Regiment of the 7th Division. This had been based at the port of Ochamchira as the standby rapid-reaction battalion to support the Russian peacekeeping units in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This battalion took up positions on August 8 on the (as yet) quiet border between Abkhazia and Georgia.

Alerts went out elsewhere. At 3:00 p.m. on August 8, another battalion of the 108th Regiment based at Novorossiysk on the Black Sea was given orders to embark on landing ships that were waiting in the port. This battalion left its barracks at 7 p.m., but then became stuck in holiday traffic. Problems were then encountered in getting the troops aboard the amphibious

ous landing ships. Boarding ships was not something these airborne troops had ever trained for or practiced. The ships eventually set sail at 4:30 a.m. the next day.<sup>51</sup> Another battalion, this from the 247th Regiment of the 7th Division (based at Stavropol), was delayed as it tried to move south because rail transport was not available at the local station on August 9. Deeper in European Russia, at Ulyanovsk, the airlift of a battalion from the 31st Separate Air Assault Brigade had to wait. Aircraft priority had been given to transporting troops to North Ossetia, not to Abkhazia.

When the conflict with Georgia began, Shamanov was still Director of Combat Training. He was now assigned (it is not clear exactly by whom) command of the group of airborne forces that were being sent to Abkhazia.<sup>52</sup> This was a very unusual change of role for any senior Russian officer. Shamanov received his orders at 1:00 p.m. on August 9 to fly from Moscow to Abkhazia. When he arrived later that day, the only troops present were the three battalions of the original Russian peacekeeping troops; the standby VDV battalion from Ocamchira; and some special forces from the 45th Separate Reconnaissance Regiment. A number of the latter had already crossed over into Georgia proper and had subsequently called in an air strike—using communications available only to *spetsnaz* forces—that destroyed a Georgian GRAD (BM-21) battery (which had not fired). Other personnel from this regiment destroyed Georgian aircraft on the ground at Senaki and captured the port of Poti, where patrol boats were destroyed.<sup>53</sup>

Shamanov, on arrival, was faced with several problems, not the least of which was the fact that his own and his units' communications were poor. He could not, for instance, get in touch with the landing ships

that were heading across the Black Sea from Novorossiysk with the battalion from the 108th Regiment. He established contact eventually after his messages were forwarded by naval units. This battalion finally docked at Ochamchira on August 10 at 6:30 a.m., and the troops disembarked to join the other battalion from this regiment; that is, the standby unit for the peacekeepers. Both battalions were in position by noon in an encampment in the Tqvarch'eli district of Abkhazia.<sup>54</sup>

Communication problems were endemic among all Russian forces operating in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This was a result not only of the fact that the Georgians could jam Russian radio traffic, but also that communications—both within units and between echelons—was weak. Russian forces lacked not only a network-centric capability (NCC), but also sufficient tactical radios at section/squad level.<sup>55</sup> This overall inability to communicate, and its adverse effects upon functional command-and-control, could have had profound consequences. For example, one VDV battalion from the 76th Division, out of radio contact and operating independently and without orders, had crossed from South Ossetia into Georgia proper and was bearing down on the undefended Georgian capital, Tbilisi. This had caused the government there to flee. If this battalion had reached the city, it could have produced major strategic consequences (including possible NATO involvement in the war). Luckily, the battalion was stopped when a senior commander caught up with it in a jeep and ordered it to halt.<sup>56</sup>

Other deficiencies were noted by Shamanov. His men lacked the night-vision aids that would enable them to fight in darkness. There was a shortage of sniper rifles and reconnaissance assets—especially

unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). There was a dearth of target-acquisition equipment and laser designators that would have allowed the VDV troops, for instance, to accurately guide ordnance from aircraft (which, in the main, they could not communicate with anyway). The tracked vehicles used by the VDV proved susceptible to landmines. While such vehicles did provide for an increased degree of mobility, they were not sufficiently armored to provide protection against the Georgian tanks and anti-tank weapons. This problem with the vehicles, when added to the general shortage of anti-aircraft and anti-tank capabilities, meant that VDV forces lacked both punch and protection.

However, despite all the glitches and equipment failings, what was clearly apparent was the high level of professionalism displayed by these VDV troops. Their units had responded quickly; they had deployed to the theater in good order; they had fought well; and they were noticeably better trained than the troops of the Russian ground forces they were operating alongside.<sup>57</sup>

## **PROPOSED STRUCTURAL CHANGES IN THE VDV**

In the wake of the war with Georgia, the general pace of Russian military reform – which had, prior to the conflict, been moving at a glacial pace – increased exponentially. With the military's overall weaknesses exposed by the conflict, the resistance of the conservative generals to reform more or less collapsed. The new look that Defense Minister Serdyukov had long sought was now finally allowed to take shape. With regard to the echelons comprising the military hierarchy, the previous command and control ar-



rangement, working downward, of Military District-Army-Division-Regiment, now came to be replaced by the simpler and less cumbersome Military District-Operational Command-Brigade (although the six Military Districts were, in turn, to be replaced by just four Strategic Commands in October 2010).<sup>58</sup> Command and control throughout the Russian military should now, theoretically, be more streamlined: there are fewer command layers. It is the creation of the brigade, however, that is the most important innovation. In the U.S. and British armies, moves had begun back in the early 1990s to abandon the division in favor of the brigade as the basic independent tactical unit. It seemed that the brigade structure was more suited to the demands of the post-Cold War interventionary tasks that were becoming more prevalent for Western militaries. But in Russia, such a change had been resisted by the vested interests on the General Staff. The war with Georgia, however, had finally forced the naysayers to see the light. The brigade—smaller, easier to control, and with greater flexibility—was the arrangement of choice for the conduct of the fast-paced maneuver warfare that was now *de rigueur* for any competent large army—including that of Russia. The lumbering division was seen as a dinosaur. It was unwieldy and inflexible, with assets routinely needed at the front line being hoarded at the divisional level. The brigade, as even the generals of the ground forces now realized, was the way forward.<sup>59</sup>

Thus, the division came to be eliminated from the Russian ground forces' order of battle. Starting in late 2008, the 203 ground force divisions were melted down to just 83 brigades. Of course, these old divisions were seldom in any sense fully manned and ready to conduct operations (most of them being just

cadre formations<sup>60</sup>). The 83 new brigades, on the other hand, are all – perhaps optimistically – slated to have full complements and to be in a state of permanent readiness.

In line with this reorganization of the ground forces, the VDV divisions were to be restructured in the same way – basically signaling an end to the VDV as a separate arm of service. The four VDV divisions were also to be reorganized into brigades, with one division, the 106th at Tula, to be disbanded completely by December 1, 2009. This airborne division was chosen as the one to be cut, since it had the fewest *kontrakt-niki* in its ranks.<sup>61</sup> Two scenarios were put forward for what was supposed to happen with its regiments. In the first, they were to be redeployed to the other airborne divisions.<sup>62</sup> In the second, they were to be divided up and their units and subunits distributed to the Military Districts, where they would form the nucleus of new (non-VDV) rapid-reaction helicopter-borne air assault brigades. One of these brigades would be stationed in each of the (then) six Military Districts. In preparation for such scenarios, recruitment for the 106th was halted in early 2009, and many of its officers began to be assigned elsewhere.<sup>63</sup>

The remaining divisions – the 7th, 76th, and 98th – were to be reorganized into brigades and distributed among the Military Districts.<sup>64</sup> The aim was to ensure that the quick-reaction capability and fighting potential of the VDV forces would be available all across Russia, and not just in the west of the country where all the VDV divisions were based. The strategic implications of such a move were quite profound. In essence, the VDV would no longer be controlled by the politico-military center, and its formations would come under the command of the individual Military

Districts. It also, in strategic terms, meant that if Russia's best combat forces—the VDV—were not to be based in the west of the country, then the political and military elite must no longer be looking at NATO as a potential enemy, but rather more toward China.<sup>65</sup>

These moves to break up the VDV were, however, stymied in May 2009 when Shamanov was appointed VDV commander in succession to Yevtukovich. The latter had been sacked basically because he was objecting to the breakup of the VDV. But Shamanov also objected to the proposed changes. Much of his particular argument lay in the fact that the VDV was already ahead of the curve in that many of the requisite structural adjustments demanded of the ground forces had already been made in the VDV. Former Commander in Chief (CINC) VDV Kolmakov had already introduced many of the changes that were only now coming to the ground forces in the wake of Georgia. Kolmakov had made his airborne battalions more independently self-sustaining by providing them with reconnaissance platoons and artillery assets that had previously been held at division level. In another move that reflected Western military practice, the VDV had, since the First Chechen War, been fighting not as regiments, but as reinforced battalions.<sup>66</sup> (Shamanov himself sees the battalion as the optimal tactical unit for the conduct of modern warfare.<sup>67</sup>) Moreover, Shamanov argued that the VDV already had only four levels of command—VDV Military Council/division/regiment/battalion—an arrangement that took orders swiftly right down to the tactical level. Thus, he said, there was no specific logic to converting the VDV divisions into brigades.<sup>68</sup>

Since he was arguing that the VDV was one step ahead of the ground forces in terms of the required

structural changes, Shamanov was able to make a convincing argument to the Ministry of Defense that the VDV should remain as it was. But his true leverage in halting such changes was not his argument but his political patron. The General Staff was hardly likely to go against the wishes of someone making such apparently sound arguments, and someone who was also a favorite of Putin (although he was by now only the prime minister to Medvedev's president). The proposed radical changes to the VDV were thus cancelled just after Shamanov took up his position of CINC VDV.<sup>69</sup>

As an individual, Shamanov had the power to basically bring the proposed restructuring of the VDV to a halt: Yevtukovich could not stop the changes, whereas Shamanov could. The VDV could keep its divisional/regimental arrangement, and was not to adopt the brigade system or be split up. Indeed, the process went into reverse. In May 2009, orders went out that the 106th Division was not to be disbanded after all, and those of its units, subunits, and officers that had gone elsewhere were ordered to return to Tula.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, Shamanov now had licence to shape the VDV as he saw fit. He was given "carte blanche . . . by the country's military-political leadership for the development of the VDV."<sup>71</sup> Given this freedom and incorporating the lessons of the conflict with Georgia as he saw them, Shamanov streamlined the VDV divisions. Now each of the four divisions, whether airborne or air assault, was to have the same basic structure: two combat regiments, an artillery regiment, a surface-to-air missile (SAM) regiment, a combat engineer battalion, a signal battalion, a maintenance battalion, a logistics support battalion, and a medical company.<sup>72</sup> The presence of a SAM regiment (with Strela-10 systems), in place of the

previous SAM battalion, represented a strengthening of the divisions in terms of their anti-aircraft capability.<sup>73</sup> Another change was that each division would now have a reconnaissance battalion instead of just a company. This came about when it was realized that Russian divisions overall and particularly in the VDV (given the fact that its troops would normally represent vanguard elements) did not devote enough capacity to reconnaissance and intelligence-gathering.<sup>74</sup>

According to Pavel Popovskikh, the former VDV Chief of Intelligence, the airborne forces have traditionally underestimated the need to “look over the hill.” He points out that in a U.S. Airborne Division, some 20-25 percent of its personnel would be devoted to reconnaissance (in the form of SIGINT, ELINT, aerial, and tactical). In contrast, when he left the VDV in 1997, only about 8-9 percent of the divisions’ strength was reconnaissance-oriented. This was at a time when a VDV division still had its own reconnaissance battalion. When these battalions came to be replaced by mere companies, the divisional manpower then devoted to reconnaissance came to represent, notes Popovskikh, only some 4-5 percent of the total. Such a deemphasis of the reconnaissance role was the result, continues Popovskikh, of a general lack of awareness in the VDV at that time of the fluidity of modern warfare and of the need to find and mark targets. One particular result of this mentality, and a major issue in the war with Georgia, was the almost complete lack of UAVs—both large and small—within the VDV, and also within the Russian military more generally.<sup>75</sup>

There was still the matter of the Military Districts/Strategic Commands needing some airborne presence. Although there were now to be no actual VDV brigades based within or to be controlled by them,

the idea that the ground forces should have their own heliborne air assault brigades still had traction. The VDV was now asked by Defense Minister Serdyukov to help train the ground forces personnel that were due to man these brigades. It was hoped that the VDV would inculcate in such trainees something of the prized “airborne spirit.”<sup>76</sup>

Shamanov now envisages a strategic scenario whereby, if Russia were to come under attack by a land incursion, there would be four layers of land-based defense. The first line would be represented by the border troops. Then there would be the local Military District/Strategic Command’s VDV-trained rapid-reaction air assault brigade. Next on the scene would be the real airborne forces, the VDV, who would arrive to assist this brigade. The final defense line would consist of the local ground forces’ motor-rifle brigades.<sup>77</sup>

Though Shamanov fought off a complete restructuring of his arm of service, this is not to say that the VDV has been left totally untouched by the post-Georgia reforms. The VDV has lost control of some of its support services – medical and personnel – which have now been, to use a word that has made its way into the Russian language, outsourced.<sup>78</sup> However, despite these minor setbacks, Shamanov, to all intents and purposes, has won. By sheer force of personality (but with obvious political support), it seems he has managed to convince the Ministry of Defense, the General Staff, and other political figures that their proposed changes, as far as the VDV was concerned, were ill-conceived. Moreover, he had not only prevented his organization from being cut up and parceled out; he had also made it stronger, with more assets, not fewer.<sup>79</sup>

## POST-GEORGIA CHANGES IN THE VDV

Beyond the actual structural reform that the VDV saw in the wake of the conflict with Georgia, other changes were also apparent. Some of these changes had long been sought and finally came to be pushed through because of the catalytic effect generated by the war. Other changes came about as a direct result of the inefficiencies that the conflict brought to light. These changes can be examined under the headings of communications, combat vehicles, unmanned aerial vehicles, and training regimes.

### **Communications.**

For a military formerly wed to the idea that radios could be utilized only by officers, and with the heritage that famously relied on flag-based semaphore to pass messages between individual armored vehicles, the changes that have occurred since the conflict in Georgia in terms of command and control within the VDV can be seen as quite profound. In response to the communication failures exhibited in Georgia, especially given the strategic consequences that could have occurred because of them, something of a revolution has taken place. It is now the aim for *all* individual troopers in the VDV to be issued an *Aveduk* tactical radio with a range of some 10km.<sup>80</sup>

Another issue highlighted for the VDV—and for the rest of the Russian armed forces as a whole—was the lack of certain network technologies now taken for granted in Western militaries. Given that the Russian army is short of even basic radios, it is no surprise that it also lacks any network-centric capability (NCC). The fact that this army has been incapable of linking

all levels of command—from the general at the very top down to the corporal on the frontline—was made readily apparent in Georgia. The Russian army clearly needs to develop its own network-centric (in Russian, *setetsentricheskiy*) capability.

The high-tech systems that make up any NCC cannot be acquired overnight. Russia's domestic military-industrial complex is struggling to produce the necessary systems. The satellite array that has to be part of any NCC is not yet up to the mark. The *GLONASS* (*Global'naya Navigatsionayya Sputnikovaya Sistema*) system (the Russian equivalent of the Global Positioning System) has been subject to numerous glitches—the principal one being the failure of a number of the array's orbiting satellites.

Progress is being made, however. New *GLONASS* satellites are being launched to replace those that have been lost, and new systems are being supplied to the military that can help generate an NCC, (although it has been estimated that it will be at least 5 years before Russian forces have a NCC to match that currently available to U.S. forces).<sup>81</sup>

The VDV has been the initial recipient over the last year or so of the requisite technologies to set up an NCC. In March 2010, the 76th Division conducted a small, tactical-level exercise during which the new *Sozvezdiye* tactical command-and-control system was first utilized. It established links between the *GLONASS* system, frontline forces, UAV operators, indigenous artillery, and other assets. The next VDV formation slated to receive *Sozvezdiye* is the 7th Air Assault Division.<sup>82</sup>



## Combat Vehicles.

The organizational culture of the VDV has always favored the use of heavy equipment. Whereas paratroopers in the West have looked to operate with as few encumbrances as possible, going in with only some light reconnaissance vehicles, the VDV has tended to stress survivability *in* the combat zone, rather than portability *to* the combat zone. This difference comes about because of the inheritance of the Soviet military's Cold War thinking. The psychology was that VDV troops should be able to defend themselves for an appreciable period of time after having been dropped behind enemy (i.e., NATO) lines before being relieved by advancing ground forces. The key element thus was survivability. Hence, we see the use by the VDV of APCs with a variety of weapon attachments, and of small self-propelled and towed artillery pieces. Shamanov supports the survivability concept. He has noted that there is a lack of heavy equipment in his divisions and wants to correct this. The fact that he has already increased the SAM component of his divisions is evidence of his thinking.<sup>83</sup> There will always be a tension inherent in this philosophy. Such vehicles and weapons must be light enough to be both air-portable and parachutable while still maintaining a modicum of battlefield punch and protection.

For some 30 years, the BMD (*Boyevaya Mashina Desanta*<sup>84</sup>) series of tracked APCs (with aluminum armor) has fulfilled the role of VDV troop transport/protection. These vehicles can be air-dropped on pallets. The 4-12 parachute canopies attached to such pallets are assisted by rockets, which act as brakes for the last few feet before landing. Occasionally, in exercises in the Soviet period, the crews of the BMDs would also be

dropped while inside their vehicles. This was naturally quite a dangerous enterprise. The thinking was that the vehicles, once on the ground, needed to become immediately operational. Dropping crew and vehicle together obviates the time-consuming marriage of crews to vehicles (dropped separately, they can end up hundreds of meters apart).<sup>85</sup>

In April 2010, for the first time in 7 years, three BMD-2 vehicles were air-dropped with personnel inside them (driver and commander). There is also now some discussion of dropping BMDs, not only with their driver and commander, but also with their entire troop complement (six troopers).<sup>86</sup> The latest drop of vehicles occurred in March 2011, when 12 were parachuted by elements of the 106th—but without crews.<sup>87</sup>

No VDV personnel or vehicles were dropped during the war with Georgia. All the airborne men and materiel arrived in theater, either by transport aircraft, ship, or train. Personnel were then delivered to contact areas in their unit vehicles unaccompanied by any ground force tanks.

Shamanov has expressed disappointment with the performance of the VDV's tracked combat vehicles (they are all tracked) during the war. His disappointment extended to the latest variant BMD-4 (armed with a 100mm gun and with better armor than the BMDs 2 and 3). The BMD-4 had first been introduced in 2004, and was slowly coming to replace the older vehicles. Shamanov's reservation concerning any BMD variant in Georgia was their immobilization if their tracks were damaged—by mines in particular. Wheeled APCs, on the other hand, are known to be able to sustain a good deal of damage before losing overall mobility. The BMD-4 also had a problem with its engine, noted even before Georgia, which was

prone to catch fire. (This same engine is also used in other Russian APCs: the BTR-90, the BMP-3, and the BMD-3.) Shamanov, warning that he would refuse to accept any more BMD-4s with its current engine, explained that the BMD-4 in Georgia did “not fully meet mobility and safety requirements.”<sup>88</sup>

The BMD-4 is also suffering from efforts to get the right balance between portability and survivability. Shamanov has an issue with the excessive weight of the BMD-4 (15 tons) and the fact that recent upgrades of the older BMD-3s have pushed up their weight (to 13 tons). This has ripple effects in terms of their portability, amenability to being air-dropped, and overall strategic reach of the VDV. The extra weight means that the workhorse transport aircraft, the Il-76 (NATO name *Candid*, can carry only two such vehicles and has its operating radius reduced (and this in an air force that also has a very poor air-to-air refueling capability.)

APCs are not the only source of weight problems. The VDV divisional upgrade from SAM battalions to SAM regiments (using SA-10M3s on a BMD-3 hull) will naturally add yet more overall weight.<sup>89</sup> This makes the divisions even less portable.<sup>90</sup> Weight has also been added in the form of new guns. Artillery of some description has always figured in Russian airborne formations, and the 2S9 Nona-S 120mm self-propelled mortar (on a BMD-3 hull) has been present for some time. Since 2006, however, the VDV has begun to augment these with the 2S25 Sprut-D 125mm self-propelled artillery/anti-tank gun. This gun is the same as the one on the T-72 and T-80 tanks. The Sprut-D (also based on a BMD-3 hull) is currently used by both the 76th and 98th Divisions. It is both amphibious and (technically) air-droppable, but like the

BMD-4 cannot yet be dropped until the necessary parachute technology is developed to deal with its weight.<sup>91</sup> Two Sprut-Ds can be carried by an Il-76. Shamanov has stated that since the Il-76 can carry only two such systems (and not three, as he would like), then the Sprut-D will not figure in the first wave of any airlift of Russian paratroopers.<sup>92</sup>

There is another problematic aspect of the VDV's vehicles. While they are becoming heavier, they are also coming to be outfitted with more sensitive electronics. These do not react well to being air-dropped. Such upgrades are happening at a time when Russia has lost a good deal of organizational memory of and expertise in parachute technology—including those related to pallet construction and to the rocket retardants that apply braking. All have been adversely affected, as with many other Russian military industries, by the fact that the company that formerly made parachutes and associated equipment is now, after the breakup of the Soviet Union, no longer in Russia. The VDV is currently waiting for domestic parachute manufacturers to catch up in producing equipment that will allow the newer vehicles to be air-dropped.<sup>93</sup> And the VDV will wait. It will not follow Western military practice and accept that armored vehicles should not be air-dropped. Parachutability appears to be something of a “sacred cow” to the organizational culture of the VDV.

Much of the problem with the weight of such vehicles as the BMD-4 and the Sprut-D comes from the tracks and associated mechanics. Wheeled vehicles, of course, represent a lighter option, and an increasingly tempting one—given the fact that they can also maintain mobility after mine or Improvised Explosive Device (IED) strikes. Shamanov has said that his

reconnaissance units will soon start to receive, as replacements for the BMDs, the GAZ-2975 Tigr APC (4 x 4).<sup>94</sup> This vehicle was recently accepted into service by both the ground forces and the troops of the Interior Ministry (the *Ministerstvo Vnutrennikh Del'* – MVD). Shamanov also admires the French VBL (*Véhicule Blindé Léger* – 4 x 4) and VAB (*Véhicule de l'Avant Blindé* – 6 x 6) family of vehicles and wants to see similar models – or even licence-built VBLs and VABs – produced in Russia. The Italian firm IVECO is also producing the LMV M65 4 x 4 vehicle for the Russian general-purpose forces, with some going to the VDV. Licenced production of the LMV M65 will soon begin at the facilities of the Russian truck firm, Kamaz.<sup>95</sup>

Here Shamanov is exhibiting a facet of his philosophy that is not apparent among many Russian generals – a willingness to accept (despite his xenophobic streak) that, when it comes to getting the best equipment for his VDV, it may need to come from abroad.<sup>96</sup> Such purchases of foreign equipment have caused no little controversy in Russia. There has always been a supposition that the Soviet Union/Russia was capable of producing the world's best military equipment. But this sentiment has been supplanted to a large degree by the recent realization that, in order for the Russian military to modernize quickly, a shortcut must be taken in sourcing. Russian industry is simply incapable of producing domestically at this time the kinds of military technologies that the services need.

While following Western conventions in coming to accept wheeled APCs, VDV leaders do agree that they can fully commit to wheeled variants. The thinking here is that Russia's army, including its airborne forces, may be called upon to operate in areas, particularly in the east of the country, where the road system is very

poor. In such circumstances, tracked vehicles would provide far greater mobility than wheeled – a factor that is not really an issue in Western military thinking. In fact, Shamanov's concern over the issue is such that he is contemplating equipping those units designed to operate predominantly in the west of Russia (such as the 76th) with wheeled vehicles, while those that are destined to go east (possibly in a confrontation with China) are given tracked vehicles.<sup>97</sup>

Certainly, the VDV has been well-supplied with new vehicles in recent years. During 2009, the airborne forces received more than 700, including 100 upgraded BMD-2s, 18 Nona-S, and 600 trucks.<sup>98</sup>

### **Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs).**

The lack of UAVs was significant across the whole range of Russian units involved in Georgia. Basic reconnaissance was hampered, as was the ability to observe in order to direct fire for artillery and aircraft. The Russians were, in many cases, fighting blind.<sup>99</sup>

The Georgians did have UAVs, and Russian forces found that they had no counter to them. Anti-aircraft artillery systems such as the ZSU-23 (effective vertical range 1.5km) could not engage Georgian UAVs, like the *Hermes*, because they operated at too great a height (above 3,000m). And heat-seeking SAMs, such as the SA-18 Igla portable air-defense system (or MANPAD), could not bring them down because they were unable to lock on to such a small target. Georgia's UAVs thus operated with impunity.<sup>100</sup>

Great efforts have since been made by the Russian military to procure more UAVs. Russian industry, however, has been very slow to develop workable systems, despite a good deal of investment being made in

recent years. The dearth of domestic UAVs has forced the Russian military once again to look abroad, and a number have been bought from Israel. The VDV has been at the forefront of the move to adopt such UAVs, and VDV troops have now started to train on Israeli drones (*Bird-Eye 400*, *I-View MK150*, and *Searcher Mk II*). These UAVs are destined for the VDV divisional reconnaissance battalions.<sup>101</sup>

The inability of the VDV to bring down UAVs in Georgia also elicited some novel thinking. Shamanov has resurrected an idea from the Soviet era of VDV forces employing manned hang-gliders. One-man versions could act, he believes, in a reconnaissance role—operating silently and carrying an individual who could see a whole vista, and not just a television screen’s limited image—such as with UAVs.<sup>102</sup> Shamanov also wants to see combat motorized hang-gliders. These were also first employed by the Soviet military and, indeed, were used by Georgian forces during the original Abkhazia-Georgia conflict in 1992-1993. Shamanov envisages the VDV having several hundred of these paraplanes (or microlites), with some having both pilot and gunner. The gunner would be present principally as a means to shoot down the types of small UAV that proved invulnerable to Russian countermeasures in Georgia.<sup>103</sup>

### **Other Equipment.**

To make up for other shortfalls, more night-vision and laser-designation equipment is being provided to the VDV. British and Australian sniper rifles have also been procured. Russian industry cannot, it seems, machine the barrels of such weapons to a high-enough standard.<sup>104</sup> And Shamanov, in an apparent desire to

match the Israeli airborne forces' ability to generate 40km of controlled horizontal aerial movement from the point of any parachutist's deplaning, has purchased sport parachutes for some of his troops that will provide for at least 20-30km of flight.<sup>105</sup>

### **Training Regimes.**

Apart from training with newly acquired technologies, one specific new regime to emerge since Georgia relates to the boarding of naval vessels. The 7th Air Assault Division at Novorossiysk is practicing embarking and disembarking from amphibious landing ships three times a year.<sup>106</sup> Senior officers from the division have also developed closer links with staff from the Black Sea Fleet, notably during an exercise called Kavkaz-2009 (Caucasus-2009).<sup>107</sup> Interestingly, although not directly linked to the Georgia experience, in August 2010 the 98th Division exercised what would be expected of any initial intervention mission—i.e., an air-drop of a reinforced battalion (800-strong) with 32 combat vehicles. Moreover, given the recent Russian interest in the Arctic region, Shamanov has discussed carrying out a drop in the types of polar conditions that would be expected in that region.<sup>108</sup>

As noted, the VDV is also being called on to train ground forces troops. This is apparent not only in the fact that VDV personnel are currently training those destined for the ground forces' new air assault brigades; it has also resulted in the VDV's noncommissioned officer (NCO) training school at Ryazan being tasked to produce, not just the VDV's own NCOs, but those of the ground forces as well. Currently at Ryazan, 100 VDV NCOs are being trained alongside some 200 from the ground forces.<sup>109</sup>



## MANNING IN THE VDV

Unlike the ground forces, which have had the number of their officers reduced substantially over the past 2 years or so, the VDV has escaped serious cuts. Few, if any, VDV officers have found themselves redundant. But the 35,000-strong VDV, despite its high profile and popularity, has not escaped entirely. It is not immune to the same sort of rank-and-file manning problems that currently face the Russian military more generally. Such issues are affecting, and will continue to affect for some time into the future, the operational capabilities of the VDV.

The original moves, begun by President Yeltsin in the mid-1990s, to convert the Russian military *in toto* from one based on conscription to one based only on professional—i.e., volunteer—service, has officially failed. Not enough young men have been recruited. The principal hindrances were the poor pay offered and the lack of suitable accommodations. While recruitment began quite well in the early stages of the program, it tailed off once the realization dawned that promises were not being kept. Subsequent rates of recruitment after the first flush of enthusiasm were poor. Moreover, once those on contracts understood what they had let themselves in for, they lost any desire to sign on for a second 3-year contract. The vast majority of *kontraktniki* resigned as soon as they had completed their service. And, to cap it all, the government started to withdraw funding from the professionalization process. Although arms of service such as the VDV were able 3 or 4 years ago to achieve formations almost completely manned by *kontraktniki*, they have now had to go back to relying for a good proportion

of their manpower on conscripts. The original hopeful target that the whole of the VDV would be fully manned by professionals by 2011 has turned out to be a pipedream.<sup>110</sup>

A further problem for the VDV, and for the whole Russian military as well, was that Putin in search of electoral popularity started to reduce the conscript term of service incrementally, from 2 years down to just 1. The next step would have been for it to disappear completely. Both Yeltsin and Putin had, after all, expected that once enough *kontraktniki* were taken on and a fully professional military formed, there would no longer be a need for conscripts. So the reduction to just 1 year of service was seen merely as a stepping stone on the road to conscription's total abolition. Thus, the real-world consequences of having a 1-year term were not really considered. Now, however, with the process of professionalization having stalled, the military is stuck with these 1-year conscripts, the worst of both worlds. First, there are not enough *kontraktniki* on which to build an efficient, well-trained professional military. What the armed forces do have is lots of 1-year conscripts—but these cannot be brought up to any real degree of proficiency. For an arm of service such as the VDV, with its vaunted swagger, skill, and fighting spirit, having so many of these short-service conscripts means it faces great difficulty maintaining these particular qualities.

The VDV has now had to accept the principle of mixed manning, i.e., *kontraktniki* and conscripts working alongside each other within units. But here the VDV is in a better position than the ground forces. For the VDV has come to be favored in that the commissariats, where recruitment takes place, have begun to send to the airborne forces a greater proportion of those

men who are still signing on as *kontraktniki*. Thus, the ranks of the VDV still contain a greater proportion of *kontraktniki* than is apparent now in the ground forces. The figure currently quoted is that about 30 percent of the manpower of the VDV as a whole are on contracts.<sup>111</sup> The commander of the 76th Division said in December 2010 that some 40 percent of his particular unit were *kontraktniki*.<sup>112</sup>

But a fall from 90 percent manning by *kontraktniki* in 2007 to just 30 percent now is certainly bound to have adversely affected the combat effectiveness of the VDV. Indeed, a further problem is raised by legal constraints. Most conscripts are legally proscribed from taking part in combat operations on Russian territory (e.g., Chechnya) or abroad.<sup>113</sup> This leaves the VDV in something of a quandary when preparing for missions.

Shamanov does not see mixed manning working in his service. He notes that “it is impossible to combine the two; we can only go . . . one way or the other.”<sup>114</sup> But even Shamanov cannot alter the underlying realities.

Another problem generated by the 1-year term is personnel churning. This comes from the fact that if the conscript term is halved, to maintain the size of the military double the number of conscripts must be called up in the twice-yearly draft. Twice the number must then leave their units at the same time. At this writing, every 6 months the VDV is losing some 20-25 percent of its manpower and replacing it with new conscripts who have undergone only 3 months’ training. In the spring of 2010, some 9,500 conscripts were absorbed by the VDV, while the same number left. It was the same in the fall of 2010. So roughly a third of the manpower of the VDV is turning over every 6

months. Such churning is bound to create disruption and to degrade unit cohesion.<sup>115</sup>

The problems the VDV is currently suffering are reflected in the comment of Colonel Igor Vinogradskiy, the commander of the 76th Division. He has talked honestly of issues related to morale and discipline within his division. "We," he says darkly, "are not able to achieve satisfactory internal order in the subunits."<sup>116</sup>

Much of this internal problem is due to a lack of NCOs. With the 1-year term, it is virtually impossible to develop satisfactory NCOs from them. They serve only for 9 months in a unit and can gain only shallow experience in that brief period. Add to this a situation in which some, if not indeed many, of the *kontraktniki* are actually societal misfits who have escaped unemployment and/or rural backwardness by signing on. They do not make good NCO material. So where are the NCOs to come from?

The overall situation will be mitigated to a large degree by the arrival in 2011 of the first *tranche* of NCOs to graduate from the newly established NCO training school at Ryazan. This school was originally set up to alleviate one of the major problems with the current conscript system—the inability to generate junior commanders. The 3-year course is for those *kontraktniki* who want to become NCOs. Thus, the VDV is currently being denuded of NCO material from its *kontraktniki* ranks, because any of the recent *kontraktniki* intake who want to become NCOs are actually spending 3 years away at Ryazan! Shamanov has said that, given the mixed-manning situation and with the expected Ryazan-NCO intake, his airborne forces will be as good as they can get by 2015—within the limitations forced by mixed manning.<sup>117</sup>

Shamanov has also voiced another positive. Since twice the number of young men are now being called up compared with a few years ago in order to compensate for the 1-year term, the conscript net has been cast wider. This, in turn, means that the VDV is receiving better human material. Even well-educated men who had previously been exempt from the draft are now being called up. Indeed, some 10 percent of the VDV's spring 2010 draft had received a university education. This is a considerable boon, especially as it is happening at a time when the VDV is receiving more and more technologically sophisticated pieces of equipment. Such equipment needs operators with skill and intelligence.<sup>118</sup>

In terms of officers, the VDV has managed to reduce its ratio of officers to other ranks. The 4,500 VDV officers make up approximately 10-13 percent of total manpower, producing an officer/other-rank ratio of about 1:6.<sup>119</sup> But 400 of these officers are actually filling in for the absent NCOs. Shamanov says that of the 14,000 NCO posts in the VDV, only half are currently filled.<sup>120</sup> Again, this situation should be improved by the arrival of the first increment of the Ryazan-trained NCOs, though their numbers are limited. Ryazan will produce for the VDV only some 100 or so NCOs every year.

## **READINESS OF THE VDV**

The actual readiness of any particular unit or formation is a topic of continual concern in Russian military circles. Since the ground force units took so long to become operational in the Georgian conflict, response times have now come to be seen as the prime criterion in judging unit efficiency. The mantra of per-

manent readiness is blithely used to describe the state of virtually *all* Russian army formations, including the 83 new ground force brigades. To the Russians, this means that they can be on their way out of their barracks gates within 1 hour of any call to move. Obviously, such a claim must be viewed with skepticism — even professional Western militaries already on alert status would have trouble moving so quickly. British experience, for instance, suggests that any battalion designated to be the army's spearhead unit (and there would be only one at any particular time) would be expected to move out of its barracks within 24 hours, certainly not in 1. The idea that an entire *army* can be on the move within an hour of being ordered to do so is basically ridiculous.

The VDV seems to have a better appreciation of the difficulties involved when it comes to readiness issues. This is a result of the fact that these units are more likely to be called into immediate action than are units of the ground forces. The VDV's Military Council has decreed that in each division, and in the 31st Separate Airborne Brigade, either one parachute or one air-assault battalion should be a first-to-engage battalion (*batalyon pervoocherednogo primeneniya*). These are on very short notice to move. Shamanov has himself stated that these battalions should have the best available equipment; have the division or brigade's most experienced personnel; and should be at least 70 percent manned by *kontraktniki*.<sup>121</sup> Beyond these five battalions, Shamanov has also made clear that a further four battalions will be at permanent readiness. His definition of this term is more readily credible — given that such units would have at least 12 hours to assemble.<sup>122</sup>

The *quid pro quo* for this arrangement is that the other VDV battalions will have poorer equipment; will carry a greater proportion of conscripts; and will undoubtedly have weaker training regimes. They will, moreover, naturally suffer a decline in morale, generated by the fact that they are being designated in effect as second-class units. Thus, there will be a qualitative difference evident between the various battalions within any VDV division.

## AIRCRAFT FOR THE VDV

There have been some recent changes in terms of the availability of aircraft for the VDV. Such changes are not specifically linked to the conflict in Georgia, but they are nevertheless noteworthy.

The transport aircraft that delivers the VDV to operational zones where paratroopers make their jumps is normally the Il-76, an air force asset. These aircraft are made available for major training exercises and operations. From the reaction times in transporting VDV troops to the Georgian theater in 2008, there seems to be little difficulty in the air force accommodating the VDV – in reaction times, if not in actual lift capacity. Currently, the air force has the capability of lifting only one VDV regiment (plus equipment) at a time (the air-dropping of a VDV company and its six BMD APCs requires six Il-76s).<sup>123</sup>

The airborne forces also make use of other aircraft, both fixed-wing and rotary. In the last year or so, the use of these aircraft by the VDV has become a matter of some debate.

## Fixed-Wing.

While Shamanov has accomplished much in terms of preserving and expanding the VDV, he has not always managed to get his own way. Despite his having powerful civilian backers, the Ministry of Defense and the General Staff are on occasion able to thwart his wishes. This is certainly the case with the training aircraft used by the VDV.

VDV personnel use the Il-76 to conduct parachute training during major exercises. Some 35,000 jumps were made from such aircraft during 2009. However, for less high-profile training, the VDV normally used the venerable An-2 and An-3 (both bi-planes and both designated *Colt* by NATO). In 2009, 154,000 jumps were made from such machines. Unlike the Il-76s, which have always been air force assets, these An-2s and An-3s were, until very recently, subordinated to the VDV command. They were thus constantly available for training purposes. If bad weather meant that on any particular day these aircraft could not fly, they would always be available the next day. However, in late 2009, in an efficiency drive that Shamanov had tried to prevent, the seven squadrons of An-2s and An-3s and three airfields were handed over to the command of the air force. This move has naturally had a deleterious effect on the VDV's training regimes. For while the aircraft could still be booked for any particular day, any cancellations due to inclement weather now mean that they have to be re-booked for some other time when the air force can again make them available. There is no flexibility in this new system.<sup>124</sup> Shamanov is currently seeking to bring these air assets back under the control of the VDV, or at least of the ground forces.<sup>125</sup>



There seems to be some sympathy for the VDV's position. While it remains unclear whether he can regain control of the training aircraft, Shamanov says that CGS Makarov has given the nod to the formation of a transport aviation brigade that would be subordinated to the 31st Separate Airborne Brigade at Ulyanovsk. This would mean that this formation, the lightest in the VDV and thus the one most easily transported by air, will have immediate lift always on hand.<sup>126</sup>

There are also other positive noises, in VDV terms, being made. Under the current "new look" program for overall military modernization, there is a plan for the period 2011-2020 to make available to the VDV newly upgraded Il-76s; a number of the massive An-124 *Ruslans* (NATO, *Condor*); and 30-40 of the new An-70s (currently only at the prototype stage).<sup>127</sup> Such are the promises being made. But as Shamanov ruefully comments, "This is planned; whether or not it happens is not for me to decide."<sup>128</sup>

### **Rotary-Wing.**

In 1990, all Russian military helicopters were transferred from air force control to that of the ground forces.<sup>129</sup> This seemed logical at the time. However, in 2003, an Mi-26 transport helicopter was shot down in Chechnya (killing 121). As punishment, perhaps, all helicopters (some 2,000, along with 10 bases) were transferred from the ground forces back to the air force. This handover has affected the VDV. Much of the logic of redesignating the 7th and 76th Divisions as "air assault" in 2006 was that they were to be provided with helicopters by the ground forces for the assaults. The machines used would be Mi-8s (NATO,

*Hip*) for transport, and the attack element would come from either Ka-52 *Alligators* (NATO, *Hokum*) or Mi-28N *Night Hunters* (NATO, *Havoc*). But no such helicopters have yet been made available by the air force, and certainly none were transferred by the air force to the VDV. Much of the issue here relates to the fact that, since moving to the air force with its fast-jet culture, the helicopter fleet has come to be neglected. The air force command seems not to know what to do with it, and the fleet is not efficiently run. If Shamanov can get his way – which it seems might just happen – then the VDV will come to have much more control over at least a portion of the helicopter fleet. This should lead to a marked increase in the fighting potential of the 7th and 76th Divisions (although they would be minus their heavy equipment in any major heliborne lift).<sup>130</sup>

## CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The Russian army has been subject to some quite radical changes in recent years, especially since the war with Georgia in 2008. The ground forces have had difficulty coping with the nature and degree of change that they have been asked to undergo. And while the VDV has likewise undergone changes, these have been limited and sometimes even positive, in terms of actually increasing the assets available to it. In essence, the VDV has not been reduced in size and has retained its basic structure. This strictly limited degree of change appears to be principally due to the influence of one individual, Vladimir Shamanov, whose role has been seminal. Indeed, his influence on the process of change in a major military organization seems to have been one of the most pronounced by any individual officer

in any country during the last century, and certainly in Russia.

Moreover, it is not out of the question that Shamanov may become the next CGS—succeeding Makarov—particularly if Putin becomes president once more.<sup>131</sup> The latter may want one of his favorite generals in charge of his military. This means that Shamanov would basically be relying for support on Putin and public opinion. In opposition would be senior officers in the Defense Ministry, the General Staff, and the ground forces. Shamanov's position would be such that he could not actively oppose any changes that Putin might want to see. He would be in thrall to him, especially given the fact that Shamanov's checkered past provides all kinds of convenient excuses for him to be removed by Putin.

Shamanov has been weakened by recent events. His use of airborne troops to interfere with the criminal investigation into his son-in-law's behavior damaged him. He has also been physically weakened by a car crash in September 2010 that left him hospitalized for several months (his driver died). Several of his opponents in the military are now pointing to his infirmity as a reason to force him into retirement. Shamanov's departure would weaken the VDV and make it more vulnerable to a takeover. At the moment, both the Ministry of Defense and the General Staff do not hold the VDV in high regard—both ignored the August 2010 celebrations to mark the 80th anniversary of the founding of the airborne forces. There are also suggestions that CGS Makarov may take over from Serdyukov as Defense Minister. If he does, the VDV may very well be absorbed into the ground forces, and thus undoubtedly be degraded as a fighting force.<sup>132</sup>

But as of this writing, the Putin-Shamanov bond still seems strong. The Russian leader visited Shamanov in the hospital on the day of his car crash.<sup>133</sup> If Shamanov is appointed to the top military job in Russia, this may set alarm bells ringing in the West. His aggressive nature, his approach to the conduct of warfare, his history of moral and ethical lapses, and his xenophobic streak are not welcome qualities in a Russian CGS, as viewed from a Western perspective.

There are a number of more general conclusions that can be drawn from this analysis of change in the VDV:

- The VDV forces are the best-trained, most proficient, and most aggressive combat troops of any large formations in the Russian military.
- VDV formations/units have quick-reaction times when called upon to conduct operations.
- The VDV will gain more combat power in absolute terms (with increases in firepower) over the next few years, but it will also become slightly less mobile overall because of increased weight.
- As the VDV starts to receive NCOs from the Ryazan training school (from 2011 onward), the quality of the VDV units will increase (but these NCOs will be few in number).
- The VDV should soon be in receipt of a helicopter force, which will increase its fighting potential.

There are certain capabilities of the VDV troops that need to be highlighted and considered:

- The VDV will shortly have an NCC capability, which should qualitatively increase the divisions' operational effectiveness.

- VDV forces will be the first to arrive—in any numbers—in any intervention operation beyond Russia’s borders. The first troops to arrive will probably be those of the GRU *spetsnaz* or from the VDV’s own 45th Separate Reconnaissance Regiment (which will be under GRU control). But both will be present only in small numbers and without armor.
- The first wave of VDV troops to arrive in operational zones from any of the four divisions, or from the 31st Separate Air Assault Brigade, will be qualitatively better than any follow-on battalions from these same divisions or the brigade. This falloff in quality applies to all the VDV divisions—whether inserted by parachute or conventionally by airlift.
- The “first-to-engage” battalions will be a match for Western forces; the follow-on battalions will more than likely not be.
- If a conventional airlift of VDV forces is conducted into an operational zone and no vehicles arrive with the troops, those troops will more than likely be from the 31st Separate Airborne Brigade.
- If a parachute drop in any numbers is made in an intervention operation, it will probably be by troops from the 98th or 106th Airborne Divisions.
- VDV troops will normally be expected to arrive with their armored vehicles—either by conventional airlift or by being air-dropped. These troops would then have more firepower and protection than any Western airborne forces operating in the same locale.

- If VDV vehicles are dropped on pallets, they may, if their crews are inside, be ready to fight immediately.
- More wheeled vehicles will soon begin to appear in the inventories of the VDV divisions.
- VDV troops will soon be in receipt of better equipment at the tactical level, which will qualitatively increase their fighting potential (British sniper rifles, for instance).

In terms of policy implications with regard to Russia's VDV, U.S. military planners should be aware of several. Russia under Putin is a country that wants to take its place in the forefront of world affairs. Such a desire will inevitably result in occasional Russian military interventions abroad. These will likely involve the VDV. The professionalism of these troops will give any Russian leader the capacity and confidence to send troops abroad to protect Russian interests. These forces require little preparation time before deployment, especially when they "go in light," i.e., without their heavy equipment. Intelligence assets may find it difficult to pick up signs that they are about to move prior to any deployment. Once dispatched, VDV troops can very quickly become operational on the ground. They will exhibit efficiency and *esprit de corps*. They may be aggressive, but this will be tempered by their discipline; they are not loose cannons. VDV forces may also operate with their heavy equipment. This will involve more preparation time and a greater logistics footprint, thus providing Western intelligence with more warning. However, if the VDV troops do "go in heavy," they will likely be more than a match for any Western forces that find themselves in the same operational zones. While such VDV troops will lack

for air cover, they will have quite sophisticated air defense assets.

This having been said, a good proportion of the VDV troops will be short-service conscripts. They will not be highly skilled. It remains to be seen what effect the longer-service members of the VDV can have on the ability of these conscripts. It must not be forgotten that the quality of the VDV forces will drop in any situation in which they require reinforcement. Follow-on units will be less able.

Russian VDV troops may very well be sent abroad in the not-too-distant future, perhaps employed if the Arab Spring continues to spread. This movement threatens Russian interests in the Middle East. Moscow has already lost out to the West in Libya, and will want to cut its losses. It is very likely to want to prevent the same happening in Syria. That may be the next role for the VDV.

## ENDNOTES

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2. Literally, "Air Landing Forces."

3. Aleksandr Stepanov, "They Ended Up in a Bad Way! Defense Ministry Begins Elimination of Airborne Troops," *Nasha Versiya*, October 31, 2010, p. 3.

4. Mikhail Lukin, "All the Airborne Troops," *Kommersant-Vlast*, August 2, 2010, p. 6.

5. In Russian, the term *armiya* means all the armed services, not just the army. So the VDV is part of the *armiya*, but is not part of the ground forces.

6. Being in such a position, the VDV has its own coordinating staff in the shape of its Military Council (although the VDV can still be directed by the General Staff). Interview with Lieutenant-General Vladimir Shamanov, *Boss Magazine*, July 15, 2010, quoted in BBC Monitoring World Media Monitor, *BBC Mon FS1 FsuPol 160710 nn/osc*.

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8. Lukin.

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13. The *Federalnaya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti* (FSB), or Federal Security Service, is the principal successor organization to the old KGB.

14. Pavlovskiy.

15. Translated as "Main Intelligence Directorate." In recent military reforms, all *spetsnaz* units were removed from GRU control to that of the ground forces. Therefore, they were operationally subordinate to the headquarters of whichever Military District they were based in. Soon, though, *spetsnaz* units, including the VDV's 45th Separate Reconnaissance Regiment, will be returned to GRU control. "Under Whom is the Spetsnaz to Operate?" March 23, 2011, *Argumenti Nedeli* website, available from *BBC Mon FS1 FsuPol 250311 nn/osc*.



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23. Stepanov.

24. Nikolai Poroskov, "Irreconcilable Differences," *Vremya Novostey*, May 7, 2009, available from [www.vremya.ru/2009/78/4/228672.html](http://www.vremya.ru/2009/78/4/228672.html).

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27. By the military correspondent, Aleksandr Sladkov, in the "Military Programme," *Rossiya 1 TV*, April 24, 2010, available from *BBC Mon FS1 FsuPol va*.

28. Vladimir Voronov, "Politics: Shamanov's Day," *Profil*, June 8, 2009, available from *BBC Mon FS1 FsuPol sv/ocs*.

29. Mikhail Lukanin, "They Have Given all of the Airborne Troops to General Shamanov," *Trud*, May 26, 2009, p. 4.

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32. Voronov.

33. He was a general in the Interior Ministry forces.

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39. *Ibid*.

40. Interview with Shamanov, *Boss Magazine*.

41. Chuikov.

42. Voronov.

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45. Voronov.

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49. *Ibid.*

50. *Ibid.*

51. Statement by Lieutenant-General Vladimir Shamanov to RIA Novosti News Agency, May 25, 2010, quoted in "Commander Says Russian Airborne Troops to Remain Separate Combat Arm," available from *BBC Mon FS1 FsuPol sv*.

52. Konstantin Rashchepkin and Andrei Lunev, "Interview with Lieutenant-General Vladimir Shamanov," *Krasnaya Zvezda*, August 1, 2009, p. 3.

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54. Konstantin Rashchepkin, "In the Abkhazia Direction," *Krasnaya Zvezda*, August 8, 2009, p. 4.

55. Report by Interfax-AVN military news agency website, July 29, 2009, available from *BBC Mon FS1 Fsu/Pol gv*.

56. Udmantsev.

57. Stepanov.

58. The six Military Districts were Moscow, Leningrad, North Caucasus, Urals, Siberian, and Far Eastern. The Strategic Commands are West, East, South, and Central. These new commands, though, are still being referred to as Military Districts.

59. Pavlovkiy.

60. Russian divisions, as per the Soviet model, were mostly mere shells during peacetime. That is, they had a cadre of officers and warrant officers who, along with just a few soldiers, maintained empty bases with their stored equipment. Such cadre divisions would be filled out only in times of tension after recalled reservists had been mobilized.

61. Chuikov.

62. Rashchepkin and Lunev.

63. Victor Baranets, "The Airborne Troops Have Been Hit by Reform: The Airborne Troops Tula Division May be Disbanded," *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, October 25, 2008, p. 4.

64. The other existing VDV formation was already a brigade: the 31st Separate Airborne Brigade (at Ulyanovsk).

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66. Rashchepkin and Lunev.

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71. "They Are Creating A Heaven-Sent Commander for Reform."

72. Lukin.

73. Viktor Litovkin, "Unified State Exam in the Serdyukov Manner," *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye*, June 26, 2009, p. 7.

74. "They Are Creating A Heaven-Sent Commander for Reform."

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76. Baranets, "VDV Commander Lieutenant-General Vladimir Shamanov."

77. Interview with Shamanov on *Ekho Moskvy* radio, July 31, 2010, available from BBC Mon FS1 FsuPol ibg.

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81. RIA Novosti, "Russian Rokot Carrier Rocket Orbits Three Satellites," September 8, 2010, available from [www.en.rian.ru/science/20100908/160511442.html](http://www.en.rian.ru/science/20100908/160511442.html).

82. Mukhin.

83. Interview with Shamanov on *Rossiya 24* News Channel, August 1, 2010, quoted in *BBC Mon FS1 FsuPol sv*.

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87. Six BMD-2s, three 2S9 *Nona* artillery pieces, a GAZ-66 truck, and a refueling vehicle. Viktor Khudoleyev, “Russia’s Army: 21st Century,” *Krasnaya Zvezda*, March 18, 2011, p. 5.

88. Nechayev. The VDV currently has an experimental batch of 10 BMD-4s, one each in 10 separate battalions. “Prospects for Rearmament and Reform of the VDV,” *Voyennoye Obozreniye* website, February 14, 2011, available from *BBC Mon FS1 FsuPol 10211 em/osc*.

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93. *Ibid*.

94. RIA Novosti, “Russian paratroopers to get new weaponry.”

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97. Konstantin Rashchepkin, "The Winged Infantry's New Appearance," *Krasnaya Zvezda*, April 21, 2010, p. 9.
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104. Aleksandr Golts, "Russian Military-Industrial Complex Needs Major Restructuring, Reform," website of *Yezhednevnyy Zhurnal*, August 31, 2009. p. 3.
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106. *Ibid.*
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109. Baranets, "VDV Commander Lieutenant-General Vladimir Shamanov."

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111. Untitled, Interfax-AVN Military News Agency, November 6, 2010, available from *BBC Mon FS1 FsuPol va*.

112. Colonel Igor Vinogradskiy, available from *Ekho Moskvy* radio, December 11, 2011, available from *BBC Mon FS1 FsuPol ibg*.

113. Conscripts who have served for more than 6 months or who are graduates *can* serve in operations. Untitled, Interfax-AVN Military News Agency, November 6, 2010.

114. Interview with Shamanov, *Boss Magazine*.

115. Ptichkin.

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117. Ptichkin.

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119. Vinogradskiy, available from *Ekho Moskvy* radio.

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122. Dimitriy Litovkin, "The Blue Berets Will Be Reinforced by Drones," *Izvestiya*, July 29, 2009, p. 8.

123. Shamanov to RIA Novosti.

124. Vadim Solovyev, "Airborne Troops' Hands are Tied," *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye*, January 22, 2010, p. 3.



125. Ptichkin.

126. Interview with Shamanov, *Boss Magazine*.

127. The An-124 is akin to the C-5, but larger. The An-70 is analogous to the European A400M. There is nothing on the horizon that can replace the workhorse An-2/An-3s. Spare parts for this fleet are running out, and even some of the operational fluids used in such aircraft are no longer manufactured.

128. Shamanov to RIA Novosti.

129. Volkov.

130. Mukhin.

131. Voronov.

132. Ivan Konev, "Minister Jumps Without a Parachute," *Argumenty Nedeli*, October 20, 2010, available from *BBC Mon FS1 FsuPol 211010 mk/osc*.

133. Stepanov.

## **APPENDIX**

### **FORMATIONS AND UNITS IN THE RUSSIAN AIRBORNE FORCES**

There are 34-35,000 personnel in the VDV (4,000 of-ficers). Each division has a strength of roughly 5,000.

#### **VDV HQ (MOSCOW)**

Commander in Chief Gen-Colonel Vladimir Shamanov.

Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Nikolay Ignatov

#### **7TH GUARDS AIR ASSAULT (MOUNTAIN) DIVISION**

Based at Novorossiysk (on Black Sea), commanded by Colonel Aleksandr Vyaznikov

#### **Regiments.**

108th Air Assault Regiment (Novorossiysk)

247th Air Assault Regiment (Stavropol)

1141st Artillery Regiment (Anapa)

#### **Support Units.**

3rd SAM Regiment (Novorossiysk)

629th Engineer Battalion (Starotitarovskaya stanitsa)

743rd Signal Battalion (Novorossiysk)

6th Maintenance Battalion (Novorossiysk)

1681st Logistic Support Battalion (Anapa)

#### **76TH AIR ASSAULT DIVISION**

Based at Pskov (Northwest Russia). Commanded by Colonel Igor Vinogradskiy

**Regiments.**

104th Air Assault Regiment (Pskov)

234th Air Assault Regiment (Pskov)

1140th Artillery Regiment (Pskov)

**Support Units.**

4th SAM Regiment (Pskov)

656th Engineer Battalion (Pskov)

728th Signal Battalion (Pskov)

7th Maintenance Battalion (Pskov)

1682nd Logistic Support Battalion (Pskov)

**98TH AIRBORNE DIVISION**

Based at Ivanovo (300kms northeast of Moscow).

Commanded by Colonel Aleksey Ragozin.

**Regiments.**

217th Airborne Regiment (Ivanovo)

331st Airborne Regiment (Kostroma)

1065th Artillery Regiment (Kostroma)

**Support Units.**

5th SAM Regiment (Balino)

661st Engineer Battalion (Ivanovo)

674th Signal Battalion (Ivanovo)

15th Maintenance Battalion (Ivanovo)

1683rd Logistic Support Battalion (Ivanovo)

**106TH AIRBORNE DIVISION**

Based at Tula (200kms south of Moscow). Commanded by Colonel Vladimir Kochetkov.

By the end of 2011, the current bases of the units of the 106th will close, and they will all be then accommodated at one facility in Tula.

**Regiments.**

51st Airborne Regiment (Tula)

137th Airborne Regiment (Ryazan)

1182nd Artillery Regiment (Naro-Fominsk)

**Support Units.**

1st SAM Regiment (Naro-Fominsk)

388th Engineer Battalion (Tula)

731st Signal Battalion (Tula)

43rd Maintenance Battalion (Tula)

1060th Logistic Support Battalion (Slobodka)

**31ST SEPARATE AIR ASSAULT BRIGADE**

Based at Ulyanovsk (South-West Russia). Commanded by Colonel Dmitry Glushenkov.

**Units.**

54th Air Assault Battalion (Ulyanovsk)

91st Air Assault Battalion (Ulyanovsk)

116th Air Assault Battalion (Ulyanovsk)

**45TH SEPARATE RECONNAISSANCE  
REGIMENT**

Based at Kubinka (near Moscow). Acting commander, Lieutenant Colonel Vadim Gridnev.

Source: Mikhail Lukin, "All the Airborne Troops," *Kommersant-Vlast*, August 2, 2010.

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